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**June 16, 2010...9:14 am**

## **Peter Vermeersch: Is Belgium an Eastern European country?**

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The latest parliamentary elections in Belgium, held last Sunday, dramatically changed the country's political landscape. In the French-speaking southern part (Wallonia) the Socialist Party (PS) stormed to victory. In the Dutch-speaking north (Flanders) the right-wing nationalists of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) attracted almost one third of the votes, a stunning result that even surprised some of the party's own candidates and made the N-VA the largest political force in the entire country. The new support comes in large part from people who in earlier elections voted for traditional mainstream parties. But also former supporters of the far right apparently jumped ship in favor of the N-VA.

There are many things remarkable about these latest elections. One is the fact that the N-VA, a party that believes the end of federal Belgium is near (and argues that this is a good thing), is now going to have to take the lead in constructing a government coalition that will govern, well, federal Belgium. And it will presumably have to do so in cooperation with the PS, which finds itself at the other end of the spectrum, not only with regard to language policy but also in ideological terms.

Another is the fact that the NV-A in this election mobilized around issues that seem either technical or of little concern to the people who live in the heartland of Flanders (such as the division of an electoral district or the protection of the Dutch linguistic dominance in a number of small communes on Flemish territory just outside the (bilingual) Brussels Capital Region). Yet the heartland massively voted for the N-VA. Why?

There are many reasons, but one that might interest the readers of this blog is the N-VA's clever reframing of the meaning of nationalism. The N-VA has managed to make people forget the old, vague, romantic and not particularly mobilizing notion of full Flemish independence and reframe its nationalism as a moderate political demand for autonomy. The party employed a number of metaphors to communicate this message. "We don't want a revolution, just evolution", said N-VA leader Bart De Wever repeatedly. We do not want to split Belgium, we will just let it "evaporate", was another slogan. This discourse was also meant to eclipse the dark sides of the Flemish movement's heritage, in particular its association with collaboration during the Second World War.

According to its defenders, the new Flemish nationalism is not driven by emotion but by calculation and economic rationality. Of course, in reality it should perhaps be called economic wishful thinking: dividing the country, even if only gradually, would probably be a complicated, messy and costly affair; and, because of the position of Brussels, it wouldn't necessarily be a particularly rational way of dealing with the governance problems that Belgium has. But the idea that more nationalism is needed, and not less, to unblock the political debates between language groups at the federal level has worked extremely well as an electoral slogan. During the campaign the N-VA forced other parties onto the defensive as they were increasingly compelled, but rarely managed, to tell a more nuanced and realistic story about the need for compromise. "Rational" Flemish nationalism was thus presented as an antidote for the confusion of Belgian "politics as usual" and as a discourse of clean efficiency, not one of exclusion or lack of solidarity across language groups.

Should observers of nationalist politics in Central and Eastern Europe be interested in these latest political developments in Belgium, which is after all only a small country in the West of Europe? I can think of two reasons why they should.

The first is: Belgium has often served, even if only implicitly, as a model for other divided societies, not in the least in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. It has been used to show how linguistic tensions (and therefore also ethnic or national ones) can be kept in check by a carefully crafted constitutional setup that makes room for compromise, autonomy, and power-sharing mechanisms. But if it turns out that the Belgian constitutional setup has only unleashed more nationalism and more competition between linguistically defined political groups it might lose its role as an institutional model. Moreover, the success of the Flemish nationalists might give politicians in the East a reason to engage further in nationalism. Especially in its softer version it seems a rewarding strategy.



Observers of Eastern European politics may also find another aspect worth considering. The N-VA has been remarkably pro-EU. At the party's victory announcement suspiciously few Flemish flags were waved. Instead the backdrop was a huge blue EU flag with one of the golden stars replaced by a Flemish lion. From De Wever's point of view this isn't difficult to explain: for him more EU means less Belgium. Moreover, by supporting the EU the N-VA can signal its allegiance to democratic values and thus distance itself symbolically from the far right. But from the standpoint of the EU this must seem rather odd. The EU has always sought to eradicate divisive nationalism, not support it. It has done so by offering an alternative post-national 'European' identification. And it has promoted such an agenda especially in the context of the enlargement process to Central and Eastern Europe. But now it turns out that even in the old member states there are politicians who creatively engage and adapt the EU's discourse not to abandon their nationalist agendas but to make them stronger and fashion them in ways that make them appear "European". This is the postmodern Europeanized nationalism of the N-VA. And such Europeanized forms of nationalism might also appear in Central and Eastern Europe.

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• stephendeets

[June 16, 2010 at 12:46 pm](#)

Thanks for the interesting post! Unlike many other scholars, I've long been wary of ethnic federalism as a long-term solution to holding together multi-national states. While I think it's a great tool for managing ethnic tension and reducing violence, I think over the long term the institutional dynamics devolve more and more power to the federal units and at some point break-up seems more and more rational. I wonder if in 25 years we'll be having similar discussions about Spain, for example. And I don't think we should be surprised by the pro-EU orientation of the these parties. In some ways the EU's push towards devolution of many matters to the local level has helped them, and the EU reinforces their arguments about the decreasing importance of states (an argument that cuts both ways, of course).

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na·tion·al·i·ty n. pl. na·tion·al·i·ties

1. The status of belonging to a particular nation by origin, birth, or naturalization.
2. A people having common origins or traditions and often constituting a nation.
3. Existence as a politically autonomous entity; national independence.
4. National character.
5. Nationalism.

(American Heritage Dictionary)

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
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